Cane River Landscape

Since the nineteenth century, the landscape along Cane River has been in a state of dynamic equilibrium. Like most rivers in alluvial areas of the earth, the Red River has meandered across its valley from west to east.

The channel systems created meander belts marked by natural levees and backswamps which have been cross-cut by crevasses and bayous. The Cane River region has at least four such meander belts: Old River, Cane River, *Atahao*-Little River, and the modern Red (once the *Rigolet de Bon Dieu*). So each channel has built up a natural levee (silt, loam, and sands) and a back swamp of lower elevation with heavy organic clay soils. Sometimes the modern systems mask the older systems with new deposits of silt and sand, actually cutting across and even erasing them.

The Red River flows into the Cane River basin, a ten-mile-wide valley which narrows to a mile wide on the north end where the uplands constrict the valley at *Grand Ecore*-Campti. Similarly, the valley is constricted again in the south, to a couple of miles near Colfax. These uplands are actually high hills eroded from a mix of Quaternary and Tertiary deposits. This situation complicated the courses of the Red-Cane Rivers, no matter which meander belt one looks at. At each end of the basin, Red River was "rafted"; that is, it was clogged with logs and other debris (Guardia 1927). At various times, the river was not navigable because of this rafting. It slowed the current of the river, and the stream dropped some of its iron-

rich silt load (Newkirk and Mueller 1981).

Older raft impacts on the western, Old River, channel left two large raft lakes: *Lac Terre Noire* and Lake Acusa at the western margin of the basin. Today, *Lac Terre Noire* is partially flooded by Sibley Lake, the Natchitoches city water supply, and ephemeral Lake Acusa is called the Flora Lowland, frequently flooded by Kisatchie Creek run-off. Another large wetland, called "the Lake" or Sang *pour Sang* Lowland, existed west of Cloutierville – it, too, seems a raft lake area.

The Tertiary hills with Quaternary deposits along them border each side of the alluvial floodplain of Red River; on lower Cane River, they are visible from the valley. These are heavily dissected with outcrops of Catahoula Sandstone – a calcareous marine deposit and some claystones; cherty gravels, especially pebble to cobble size, are common in the Quaternary deposits. These upland clays are clearly differentiated from the red sediments of the valley. Derived from the Permian Basin red sediments in New Mexico and Oklahoma, this is some of the most fertile alluvium on the Gulf Coastal Plain.

Natural vegetation is horizontally zoned. Cottonwood, Sycamore and Willow dominate the edge (batture) of the active river. Flooded when the river rises, this area is inundated annually at least once or twice a year. The natural levees, higher and drier, often frost free for more days a year, supported rich growths of mixed bottomland hardwoods: Bitter Pecan, Water Oak, Overcup Oak, Red Gum, Pecan, and Pin Oak. The backslopes graded off into swamps and ox-bow lakes filled with Cypress and Tupelo Gum. Honey Locust seems to fill

abandoned clearings in the backswamps.

The uplands rise into terraces or bluff lands before they turn into the sandstone hills of the Catahoula Formation. These lower terraces are silt-loam, sand and clay soils. Their dominant climax vegetation seems to have been Oak-Hickory forest with Beech and Gum in the creek bottoms. This is a very diverse ecozone, and Sassafras, wild grapes (at least three varieties), wild cherry, and numbers of other lower-story plants made it a high-use area for hunting and gathering.

Spanish moss was abundant in the backswamps, and on parts of the natural levees particularly up to Little River - there once were cane breaks. Swamp or Black Haw was another wetland tree. These areas once attracted herds of white-tailed deer. Squirrel hunters and other hunters used the backswamp-backslope areas as primary food areas.

The highest uplands were dominated by immense stands of Longleaf Pine, now replaced by more rapid-growth pines. Low growth included various grasses and berries. It was a fine area for grazing cattle and hogs. It, too, was hunted and gathered. Not only did it supply food, medicine and lumber, but sandstone blocks for buildings. These uplands are mostly in Kisatchie National Forest now, protected by the U.S. Department of the Interior and far less accessible to the Creole community than they were in the past.

These were the lands the Creoles called home by the end of the eighteenth century and which they knew well before that. They remain in this same area still.[1]

1. WE KNOW WHO WE ARE: . . by H. F. Gregory and Joseph Moran pp. 68-70